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## ABSTRACT

This study of levels of self-esteem in a sample of black disadvantaged children was conducted to investigate factors known from other studies to facilitate the development and maintenance of a favorable self-concept despite adverse environmental conditions and skin color. The child subjects were selected from six classes of fifth grade black children in a de facto segregated section of Harrisburg. Self-concept was assessed by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, which is a wide-range standardized instrument reflecting feelings about behavior, intellectual status, popularity, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, and happiness. Teacher ratings were made using Coopersmith's Behavior Rating Form. The "high" group comprised 15 boys whose scores were 64 or above on the Piers-Harris, and in the highest quartile of their class on the teacher ratings. The "low" group comprised 15 boys whose scores were 48 or below on the Piers-Harris and in the lowest quartile of their class on teacher ratings. The "high" group had better peer relationships, better achievement test scores in some areas, and somewhat better mother-child relationships. Neither the boys nor their mothers in the "high" group displayed better acceptance of black identity. Since the mean self-concept levels of this population were at or above the means for white samples, it appears that the effects on self-esteem or minority race or low socioeconomic level are not inevitably negative, but depend to a considerable degree on aspects of the immediate social environment. (Author/JM)

Abstract

Characteristics related to the maintenance of self-esteem were studied in two groups of black disadvantaged fifth grade boys and their mothers. The groups of boys were equivalent on mean intelligence scores, but widely different on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale and on teacher estimates. As predicted, the 'high' group had better peer relationships, better achievement test scores in some areas, and somewhat better mother-child relationships. Contrary to expectation, neither the boys nor their mothers in the 'high' group displayed better acceptance of black identity. Since the mean self-concept levels for this population were at or above the means for white samples, it appears that the effects on self-esteem of minority race or low socio-economic level are not inevitably negative, but depend to a considerable degree on aspects of the immediate social environment.

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Variables Affecting Self-Concept in Black Disadvantaged Boys

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Study of the self-concept has been viewed as augmenting the understanding of the black disadvantaged child's problems in adjusting to "Middle Class America." According to Snyder (1965, p. 243), the self-concept is "...the organization of qualities that the individual attributes to himself in varying situations" (Kinch). The way that a disadvantaged black child perceives himself should be revealed by his self-concept. However, conflicting views exist concerning the subculture of the ghetto child as possessing positive or negative attributes which contribute to his development of a high or low self-concept. Many studies report lower self-concept in black or minority group samples. (Clark, 1965; Snyder, 1965; Grambs, 1965; and Hawk, 1967).

Although the conditions experienced by the ghetto child may affect him adversely, positive attributes also exist within his cultural milieu. This viewpoint is maintained by Riessman (1964) who believes that there are positive attributes that enable the ghetto child to cope with his adverse environmental conditions. Some of these attributes are: lessened sibling rivalry, freedom from parental overprotection, cooperation and mutual aid from extended family, and use of physical and visual style in learning.

It thus cannot be assumed that the black disadvantaged child will necessarily report lower self-esteem. Several studies have demonstrated this fact (Bachman, 1970 and Soares & Soares, 1970).

The focus of the present study was on levels of self-esteem in a sample of black disadvantaged children. It was further conducted to relate factors known to be significant in other studies to their ability to develop and maintain a

favorable self-concept despite adverse environmental conditions and skin color. Specifically, it was predicted that in groups reporting high or low self-esteem, the high group would have:

- (1) better peer relationships
- (2) higher achievement test scores
- (3) better acceptance of their black identity

The mothers of boys in the high group were predicted to:

- (1) be more accepting of their black identity
- (2) have better child-rearing attitudes and practices

#### Method

##### Subjects

The child subjects were selected from six classes of fifth grade black children in a de facto segregated section of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They had been defined as disadvantaged by the school system, on the basis of an average income of \$3,000 a year, or less. Thirty boys and their mothers were used for the main portion of the study.

##### Instruments

Self-concept was assessed by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969), which is a wide-range standardized instrument reflecting feelings about behavior, intellectual status, popularity, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, and happiness. It consists of 80 items (e.g., I am a happy person) to be answered "yes" or "no." Norms are available for Grades 4 through 12 (Piers, 1969).

Teacher ratings were made using Coopersmith's Behavior Rating Form (1967), which is a 13-term form devised to rate self-esteem behavior and defensive behavior in children.

An abbreviated version of the Peer Nominations Scale which was employed by Cox (1966) in his study on peer acceptance-rejection and personality development, was used to measure peer relationships. The format of this scale consisted of subjects' naming four boys whom they like most and two boys whom they like least in their respective classes.

Six questions concerning the acceptance of black identity of the boys and their mothers were developed by the principal investigator. The questions tap attitudes of self-worth relative to the white population (e.g., I will do as well as a white boy in the world).

Coopersmith's Mother Interview (1967) was shortened and adapted for a lower socio-economic group. Many of the items retained had been grouped by Coopersmith to reflect various aspects of child-rearing practices or parental attitudes, such as "mother's achievement demands in infancy," "parental intrusiveness and control," etc.

Lorge-Thorndike IQ scores and Stanford Achievement Test scores (Intermediate 1), were obtained from cumulative records in the schools.

#### Procedure

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was administered to all children in six fifth-grade classes, by the principal investigator, a middle class black female. The 78 boys in these classes also filled out the questions concerning their black identity, and the Peer Nominations Scale. Each teacher completed the Behavior Rating Scale for all boys in her class.

Since high scores on self-report scales may reflect social desirability or defensiveness as well as high self-esteem, the teacher Behavior Rating Form was used to corroborate the score on the Piers-Harris Scale. The 'high' group thus consisted of 15 boys whose scores were 64 or above on the Piers-Harris, and in the highest quartile of their class on the teacher ratings of self-esteem

behavior. The 'low' group consisted of 15 boys whose scores were 48 or below on the Piers-Harris and in the lowest quartile of their class on teacher ratings. Both groups had scored 12 or below on defensiveness.

All scoring and assigning into groups was carried out by the second author and assistants. The principal investigator thus had no knowledge of which child was in which group when she interviewed the mothers.

The mothers were invited to meet with the interviewer either in their homes or at the school. All but four chose to see her in their homes, which were, for the most part, in a low-cost housing project and a low-income district. Information relating to background variables was obtained and the adapted form of the Mother Interview was administered orally, along with questions concerning acceptance of black identity. The average length of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes.

### Results

The mean score on the Piers-Harris for all the 75 boys tested, was 55.39, with a S.D. of 12.68. For the high and low groups of 15 boys each, the means were 67.73 and 35.53 respectively. These are reported in Table 1, of your handout. IQ scores for the two groups were found to be not significantly different at the .05 level, averaging 86.93 for the high group and 83.47 for the low group.

Frequencies were tabulated for the peer ratings. Since the number of boys in each class varied, the frequencies for each boy were translated into percentages of his class and then into standard scores. Means and standard deviations of these scores for the high and low self-concept groups are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that there were significant differences between the groups for Liked Most, Liked Least, and Liked Most minus Liked Least.

A second area being investigated was achievement test performance. As you can see in Table 3, subtest scores were consistently higher for the high self-concept group, but only Word Meaning and Arithmetic Computation were found to be significantly higher at the .05 level.

The 33 items from the mother interview were scored both individually and on the content groupings suggested by Coopersmith. Since frequencies were small in each of the five or six scoring categories for each item, they were subsequently collapsed into two categories. Fisher Exact Probability tests on the two categories were run to examine differences between the frequencies for high and low self-concept groups.

Looking at Table 4, you can see that significant differences at or below the .05 level were found for groupings reflecting mother-child relationship and mother's estimate of the child. The latter included questions about both ability and adjustment. When the mother's estimate of the child's ability alone was considered, this also showed a significant difference. Other individual significant items were: changes brought about with arrival of children; and difficult child-rearing periods. Thus mothers of high self-concept children showed closer rapport with their children, and rated them higher on intellectual ability and adjustment. They reported more responsibilities with the arrival of children, and recognition of difficult child-rearing periods.

The final area being investigated was acceptance of black identity. Means and standard deviations for the six items were computed for boys in both groups and for their mothers. Two points were given for each item when it reflected acceptance of black identity. t tests were conducted to determine if significant differences existed between boys in the 'high' group and the 'low' group, between mothers of boys in the 'high' group and those in the 'low' group, between boys in the 'high' group and their mothers, and between boys in the 'low' group and

mothers. While the high self-concept boys had higher mean acceptance scores, none of the comparisons reached significance at the .05 level.

#### Discussion

The obtained mean on the Piers-Harris Scale for the full sample of 75 boys is at or above the means for normative samples of white children (Piers, 1969). This supports previous findings by Soares & Soares (1970) and Bachman (1970). It conflicts with findings by Hawkins (1967).

Correlations between intelligence and self-concept for white children have generally been found to be positive, but averaging below .30 for global scores (Coopersmith, 1967; Piers, 1969). In the present study, both high and low self-concept groups had below mean IQ scores, (which are subject to the usual reservations with respect to the "culture-fairness" of the test), but the means were not significantly different from each other. Perhaps because of the homogeneity of the schools, the below average IQ scores did not prevent some children from reporting high self-esteem.

Peer ratings showed the most significant differences between the self-concept groups. While no statements can be made regarding cause and effect between these, results confirm previous findings with white samples that the two are definitely related.

Items for the Mother Interview had been chosen primarily on the basis of significantly differentiating high and low self-concept groups in Coopersmith's (1967) sample. In the present study, only a few of his findings were repeated. In general, the findings seemed to reflect closer rapport and a higher opinion of their child's intelligence by the mothers of high self-concept children, as well as a somewhat more responsible attitude toward motherhood.

The failure to find significant differences in acceptance of black identity between the groups was puzzling, and different from results of previous studies. Long (1968) for example, reported that the black "disadvantaged" six-year-olds who had lower self-esteem also had a less realistic self-concept in relation to skin color. Meyers (1967) reported that positive attitudes toward being black were correlated with positive self-concept and achievement.

In the present study, all four groups were quite acceptant of their black identity. While the results might be attributed to the positive effects of the black awareness movement, it is perhaps more likely that they were related to the de facto racial segregation of the sample, the geographical area, or to the number and nature of the questions themselves. These were previously untested, and therefore of unknown reliability and validity. Further work should be done both on the measure and on the variable itself, in integrated settings and in other parts of the country.

From the interviews, possible explanations for disparities obtained between the present study and previous studies can be suggested. It seemed as though the black low-class mothers were concerned with their ability to feed their children, their ability to pay their debts, and their ability to survive without a male figure in the home, whereas previous studies show white middle-class mothers are concerned more with their son's right of individuality, societal values, and religion. It is important to note that despite the fact that the majority of fathers were absent from the home, some boys still had high self-concept.

It is probably indisputable that race and socio-economic level are variables that can affect self-esteem when mediated by negative social attitudes. What seems clear, however, is that their influence is more situation specific, and that with positive home, peer, and school relationships it appears possible for some black disadvantaged children to maintain high self-esteem.

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Variables Affecting Self-Concept in Black Disadvantaged Boys

Table 1

Mean Self-Concept Scores and IQ's for High and Low Groups

|                   | N  | Self-Concept | IQ    |
|-------------------|----|--------------|-------|
| High Self-Concept | 15 | 67.73        | 86.93 |
| Low Self-Concept  | 15 | 35.53        | 83.47 |

Table 2

Peer Rating Differences Between  
High Self-Concept Group and Low Self-Concept Group

| Rating                          | High Self-Concept |     | Low Self-Concept |      | t       |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----|------------------|------|---------|
|                                 | X                 | SD  | X                | SD   |         |
| Liked Most                      | 5.56              | .81 | 4.98             | .53  | 2.35*   |
| Liked Least                     | 4.69              | .63 | 5.29             | 1.21 | 4.82*** |
| Liked Most Minus<br>Liked Least | 5.43              | .85 | 4.57             | 1.01 | 2.55**  |

\*p < .05

\*\*p < .01

\*\*\*p < .001

Table 3

Mann-Whitney-U Differences between High and Low Self-Concept Groups on the  
Stanford Achievement Test - Int. 1 (Grade Equivalents)

|                      |           | WM    | PM   | SP   | WSS  | L    | ACCOMP | ACON | AAP  | SS   | S    |
|----------------------|-----------|-------|------|------|------|------|--------|------|------|------|------|
| High<br>Self-Concept | $\bar{X}$ | 4.10* | 3.95 | 4.19 | 3.90 | 3.46 | 4.38*  | 4.42 | 3.93 | 4.40 | 4.20 |
|                      | SD        | 1.12  | 1.84 | 1.61 | 1.55 | 0.89 | 1.09   | 1.36 | 0.87 | 1.07 | 1.07 |
| Low<br>Self-Concept  | $\bar{X}$ | 3.47  | 3.42 | 3.52 | 3.16 | 2.94 | 3.45   | 4.09 | 3.70 | 3.83 | 3.73 |
|                      | SD        | 0.87  | 0.97 | 0.99 | 1.14 | 0.78 | 0.98   | 1.46 | 0.96 | 0.86 | 0.88 |

\*Significant at 0.05 confidence level

WM - Word Meaning  
PM - Paragraph Meaning  
SP - Spelling  
WSS - Word Study Skills  
L - Language  
ACCOMP - Arithmetic Computation  
ACON - Arithmetic Concepts  
AAP - Arithmetic Applications  
SS - Social Studies  
S - Science

Table 4  
Fisher Exact Probability Test for  
Mother-Child Relationship Items

|                   | Close Rapport | Moderate to Distant Rapport |
|-------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| High Self-Concept | 8             | 7                           |
| Low Self-Concept  | 2             | 13 $p < .05$<br>(1 tailed)  |

Table 5  
Fisher Exact Probability Test for Mother's  
Total Estimate of Child

|                   | Exceptional to Average | Below Average             |
|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| High Self-Concept | 15                     | 0                         |
| Low Self-Concept  | 11                     | 4 $p < .05$<br>(1 tailed) |